

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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WASHINGTON - The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), an independent and bipartisan federal agency, yesterday released a series of new reports on the status of religious freedom in Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Vietnam, Russia, Laos, and Belarus. The reports contain policy recommendations for the President, the Secretary of State, and the Congress.

USCIRF Chair Felice D. Gaer said, "Advancing human rights and religious freedom has not yet been a public feature of the US-Saudi bilateral relationship. Our goal in releasing this Annual Report on religious freedom has been to highlight that the protection of religious freedom and other human rights must be an integral part of U.S. relations with Saudi Arabia and other countries."

Saudi Arabia: The U.S. government needs to identify human rights problems in Saudi Arabia and publicly acknowledge that they are significant issues in the bilateral relationship. USCIRF recommendations include the following:

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Investigate Saudi government funding of the global propagation of a religious ideology that promotes hate, intolerance, and in some cases violence. Congress should authorize and fund such a study and the U.S. government should urge the Saudis to cease any funding efforts.

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Use leverage to encourage implementation of reforms in Saudi Arabia, including naming Saudi Arabia a "country of particular concern" and expanding human rights assistance, public diplomacy and other programs.

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Press for immediate improvements in respect for religious freedom, including dissolving the mutawaa and permitting non-Wahhabi places of worship in certain areas.

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Hold biannual hearings in Congress for the State Department to report on religious freedom issues raised with Saudi Arabia and that government's response, as well as on the Department's plan for expanding initiatives to advance human rights in Saudi Arabia.

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Ensure that any existing restrictions on the religious practice of U.S. military and diplomatic personnel be lifted permanently.

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Investigate reports that some U.S. companies in Saudi Arabia engage in practices that constitute or facilitate discrimination or violations of religious freedom or other human rights.

Afghanistan: There are continuing reports of serious human rights abuses, reported efforts to circumscribe human rights in Afghanistan's new constitution, and indications that Afghanistan in being reconstructed - without serious U.S. opposition - as a state in which an extreme interpretation of Sharia would be enforced by a government which the United States supports and with which our nation is closely identified. USCIRF recommendations include the following:

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Appoint a high-ranking official to the U.S Embassy in Kabul to advance human rights.

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Expand the international security presence beyond Kabul and end U.S. support for warlords.

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Urge the Karzai administration to abolish religious police.

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Expand programs to inform Afghans about human rights.

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Fully fund the human rights programming envisioned in the Afghan Freedom Support Act of 2002.

Vietnam: Since Congress passed the U.S.-Vietnam Bilateral Trade Agreement in September 2001, the already poor religious freedom conditions in Vietnam have deteriorated. USCIRF recommendations include the following:

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Make clear to the government of Vietnam that cessation of religious freedom violations is essential to continued expansion of bilateral relations.

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Designate Vietnam as a "country of particular concern."

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Pass the Vietnam Human Rights Act of 2003 in Congress.

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Withhold support for non-humanitarian loans to Vietnam from international financial institutions until substantial improvements are made in the protection of religious freedom.

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Review the Vietnamese government's human rights practices as part of the annual review of the Jackson-Vanik waiver for Vietnam.

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Overcome jamming of Radio Free Asia broadcasts and blockage of the RFA Internet site.

Russia: An attempt is underway on the part of elements within the Russian government, aided or perhaps encouraged by the Russian Orthodox Church, to curb religious freedom further and bring the religious practice of Russian citizens under the closer control and tutelage of the state. USCIRF recommendations include the following:

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Raise concern about the growing influence of undemocratic forces on Russian government policies.

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Oppose attempts to rollback religious freedom and urge protection of religious minorities against violent attacks and intolerance.

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Remain vigilant on the progress of Democratic reform and protections for human rights in Russia, reinstate the Smith Amendment, and ensure that a monitoring mechanism be in place should Congress graduate Russia from Jackson-Vanik.

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Support those who advance democracy, religious freedom, and other human rights.

Laos: Laos is at an important crossroads between those who advocate that the country follow the model of China and Vietnam, and those who seek to modernize the country by learning from the United States and other Western democracies that respect human rights. USCIRF recommendations include the following:

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Designate Laos a "country of particular concern" to make clear U.S. concerns over particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

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Establish a bilateral human rights dialogue with measurable goals to eliminate violations.

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Provide assistance to Laos to take steps to reform its practices, policies, laws, and regulations that contribute to religious freedom violations, if the Laos government demonstrates a genuine commitment to change, beginning with a State Department assessment of the human rights needs in Laos.

Belarus: In October 2002, President Alexandr Lukashenko signed new legislation on religion that further restricts religious freedom in Belarus. The law has been called the most repressive religious law in Europe. USCIRF recommendations include the following:

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Use every measure of diplomacy to advance the protection of human rights and religious freedom, including enhanced monitoring and public reporting, especially in light of the weakened monitoring mandate of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

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Adopt the Belarus Democracy Act of 2003 in Congress.

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Raise religious freedom and other human rights concerns in Belarus with Russian government officials, because of the special relationship that exists between the two countries.

Commissioners are Felice D. Gaer, Firuz Kazemzadeh, Richard Land, Bishop William F. Murphy, Leila Nadya Sadat, Nina Shea, Hon. Charles R. Stith, Dean Michael K. Young, and Ambassador John V. Hanford III, Ex-Officio. Visit our Web site at www.uscirf.gov.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

- Felice D. Gaer ,
Dean Michael K. Young ,